

Royal Mail Philatelic Products

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As you may have guessed from the public service announcement on the inside front cover, this month I will be wittering on and on about Stamp Cards.

Just in case any *Bulletin* readers are unaware of these, Stamp Cards are postcard-sized reproductions of pictorial stamps. They can, of course, be used as postcards but they seem to appeal mostly to collectors, rather than to people who just want to send a short message to friends or relatives.

Indeed, when they were first launched in 1973, the idea was they should be used as postal stationery rather than become collectors' items, kept pristine and virginal in the postcard enthusiast's album.

I think this is a pity as they can make very attractive cards and can help spread awareness of stamps in general. As more Post Shops open and awareness of Stamp Cards is boosted through wider availability from self-service dispensers, I am sure they will be taken up by more non-collectors as an appealing alternative to the usual "scenes of Nether Wallop" type postcard.

Stamp Cards were at first officially described as "picture cards", later as "picture postcards" or simply "postcards". However, collectors called them "PHQ Cards" because the serial number printed on the reverse of each card began with these initials. The Post Office did not adopt this nomenclature until 1986.

In case you have ever wondered, PHQ stood for Postal Headquarters which, together with THQ (Telecommunications Headquarters) and CHQ (Central Headquarters) comprised the head office of what was then the Post Office Corporation (halcyon days!).

The first "picture card" was produced in association with the County Cricket Centenary stamps, issued 16 May 1973, and featured a reproduction of the 3p stamp from that set. Looking at the latest copy of Stanley Gibbons *Collect British Stamps* (available by mail order from the British Philatelic Bureau, a snip at £4.95), I see that some of the early cards are now quite valuable – three are, in fact, listed at over £100 each in unused condition.

The first full set of PHQ Cards was produced the following year, this time as reproductions of each of the four Great Britons stamps. However, issuing policy remained rather erratic until April 1976 and the issue of a single stamp to mark the Bicentenary of American Independence. From this issue on, PHQ Cards were issued in association with every Special Stamp issue.

Because of the difficulties in promoting a product with the prosaic official title "postcards" or the esoteric collectors' name of "PHQ Cards", the name was changed in 1989 to "Stamp Cards". Since then, the range of stamp issues reproduced as postcards has broadened to encompass Greetings Stamps and High Value Definitives.



Maxi-card for Art in the 20th century issue

Maxi-Cards

The term "unused" when applied to a postcard is fairly self explanatory but does beg the question, what then is a "used" PHQ or Stamp Card? This is usually interpreted as a postcard with a stamp of the same design affixed either to the picture side or to the reverse, cancelled with an official first day of issue postmark. When affixed to the picture side, these are known as "maxi-cards". This seems to be a popular way of collecting Stamp Cards and I would be very interested to know whether collectors would like to see them re-designed so as the stamp and postmark can be accommodated without overlapping onto the illustration. An alternative could be for Royal Mail to offer the option of having Stamp Cards supplied with stamps already affixed and cancelled.

As always, I would be very interested to hear the views and suggestions of *Bulletin* readers, particularly those who collect Stamp Cards, on any aspects of this product. I look forward to hearing from you – preferably on a Stamp Card!

Readers should write to Mr Burke at: Royal Mail National, 76 Turnmill Street, LONDON EC1M 5NS.